

# Fires and floods illustrate critical role of county governments

When the history of Cochise County is written, the summer of 2011 will be recorded as one of the most tragic and devastating in County history.

Beginning with the Horseshoe 2 Fire on May 8 and culminating with the Monument Fire on June 12, over 6% of Cochise County was virtually destroyed in a period of less than two months. During that time, over 250,000 acres of scenic country in the Chiricaua and Huachuca Mountains was scorched almost beyond recognition. Even more tragically, over 74 homes and businesses were destroyed, adding a heartbreaking human element to what has been a calamitous summer.

From the opening days of the Horseshoe 2 Fire, Cochise County has been aggressively working to provide assistance and protection to residents and businesses affected by the fires. This assistance has included:

- County Emergency Management personnel coordinating the deployment of resources on both fires
- Deputies from Sheriff Dever's office assisting with evacuations, patrols, and road closures
- County highway crews grading emergency access routes and fire lines for firefighters and providing other assistance as directed by incident command
- County highway crews supplying sand and sandbags to residents for flood protection
- County Solid Waste personnel providing an emergency temporary transfer station to fire victims at no cost, allowing them to dispose of debris from their burned homes and lots
- County Planning and Zoning staff providing a temporary office at the fire site, allowing residents affected by the fires to conveniently receive demolition, minor repair permits, and electrical inspections free of charge
- County Planning and Zoning staff supplying flood protection information to residents in affected areas

These activities, from emergency road building to evacuations, illustrate the critical role that counties often play in times of emergency or natural disaster. In cooperation with local, state, and federal partners, counties are among the first to respond to local crises, providing essential and timely services where they are needed most. Under the leadership of Governor Brewer, who declared a state of emergency in the County, the state also provided valuable assistance.

Unfortunately, the ability of counties to provide these services is increasingly complicated by a sharp decline in local revenues, as well as the state's ongoing shift of costs and responsibilities to Arizona's county governments. Since 2008 the state legislature has shifted \$5.3 million in state costs and responsibilities to Cochise County, including requiring the County to pay for inmates in the Arizona State Hospital and diverting County road funding to fund the Department of Public Safety.

Cochise County has been able to manage its way through this crisis, though not without great difficulty. It's unknown, however, whether the County will be able to absorb another year of cost shifts from the state without jeopardizing the kinds of services made available to residents over the last two months.

As the residents of Cochise County prepare for the looming threat of flooding, they can be assured that the leadership and employees of the county will continue to serve them to the best of their ability. Likewise, as the state legislature prepares for its upcoming session, let's hope that our state lawmakers do not place additional burdens on county governments at a time when county governments are needed most.

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